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ABSTRACT

The word processor helps teachers to use the process approach to writing. In using the word processor, the teacher can create tasks on the computer to assist students during each step of the writing process, i.e., prewriting or idea processing, drafting or writing, revising/rewriting or editing, and the publishing process or communicating. Ideas presented for using the word processor for each of these tasks can be adapted to match the student's age, interests, and ability level, and attention is given to the special needs student in the classroom. (4 references) (GL)

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A PROCESS APPROACH TO WRITNG WITH A COMPUTER

by Sandy Miller-Jacobs, Ed.D.

Writing is one of the skills taught in school. The second of the "Three R's", it is a skill that has been part of the school curriculum for years. It is, in fact, still one of the main communication skills taught. Yet, it is taught differently today than in years' past, even the more recent past when many of us who are teachers were students. The teaching of writing has changed from a product to a process oriented approach. This means that teachers are focusing on the processes their students use to create their ideas, formulate their thoughts, and transfer them to paper, rather than focusing on the final copy (otherwise known as "copy it over on white paper"). In using a process approach, teachers develop writing skills for each of the three major processes involved in writing: prewriting, drafting, and revising/rewriting. Often a fourth process, publishing, is introduced into the classroom to help students see that the real purpose for writing is to communicate with others.

The word processor helps teachers use the process approach, since the concept of this tool software is the processing of words. In using the word processor, the teacher can create tasks on the computer to assist their students during each writing process. While these tasks could be done as task cards for a classroom without a computer, the word processor presents a neat copy for the student and more easily allows for editing.

THE PREWRITING PROCESS - IDEA PROCESSING

The planning process is a pre-writing process that can also be called idea processing because it determines what is going to be written. No one can write about nothing; anyone can write about something. In idea processing the broad "something" becomes narrowed to a specific topic selected by the writer. The writer goes through a process of generating and disgarding ideas until one idea is selected ("Now that's something I have lots to tell about!").

Since words written with a word processor are easily erased and moved, students experience more freedom in expressing their ideas. Ideas written on the computer are more concrete and can be selected easier than ideas floating around inside the brain.

Teachers can help their students select an idea by beginning a variety of lists that can be added to by students. Special needs students will relate better to ideas that are a part of their everyday experiences.

o Generate a list of possible ideas (e.g., favorite sport, interesting sites, top song on the radio).

o Generate a list of descriptive words (adjectives and adverbs).

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o Generate a list of phrases that might evoke thoughts (e.g., test of the emergency broadcast network, teen pregnancy, 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1).

o Generate a list of questions (e.g., What does it look like? How does it feel? When did it happen?).

o For a specific topic (e.g., Who I Would Like To Be), generate a list of points to be considered (e.g., personality, career, values, influence).

o For a specific topic generate a list of descriptive metaphors that must be completed (e.g., nourishing as ___, soft as ___, joyful as ___).

o Generate a list of problems or conflicts. Each conflict should be explained in one or two paragraphs.

For each list begun by the teacher, students can add their own ideas, questions or metaphors to the list. While this can be individually, brainstorming works best with a group. Therefore, students can work in small or large groups to add to the list. This list can then be saved on the class "idea processing disk" or saved on the students' personal data disk. Those ideas or parts of lists that relate to the students' current writing assignment can be saved and the others deleted. This shorter list should be saved as a file of ideas for writing assignment one (IDEAS1)

Figure 1:
File: IDEAS1
TASK CARD 3
A) Brainstorm additional phrases and add them to the following list.

Clean up your room.
10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1
May I have you attention please.
The show will begin in five minutes.

THE DRAFTING PROCESS - WRITING

Once the idea or writing topic is decided, the student must begin to put words onto the screen. Research shows that students who use the word processor write longer pieces.

Helping students transfer their ideas into words can be helped by referring to their prewriting ideas. Using their own data disk and selecting IDEAS1 as the file, students can begin to respond to the questions or phrases. Students should be encouraged to type directly onto the computer rather than bringing their yellow copies and typing them into the computer. The following ideas may encourage the drafting process:

o Answer questions generated during idea processing and then delete the questions.

o Complete each metaphor with as many sentences as possible.

o Write as much as possible without stopping for five minutes. Use free associations to go from one idea to

another; those that seem irrelevant can be easily deleted later.

o Create a story starter and let the students complete it.

o Wrte a sentence for each descriptive word listed.

o Write a solution for a problem or conflict. Begin by writing as many solutions, realistic or not.

Figure 2
File: Writing1
TASK CARD 3
A) Select one of the phrases from IDEAS1 TASK CARD 3 and copy it onto this task card.
B) Write all the things that come to mind. These ideas can be both realistic and fantasy.
C) Move together all the ideas that are related in some way. Skip a space only between groups of ideas.
D) Select one of these idea groupings. Begin a word processing file and copy these ideas to that file. You now have a good beginning for this writing task.

REVISING/REWRITING PROCESS - EDITING

The revising/rewriting process amounts to fine tuning the writing. In fact, writing is a continual process of revision; it is also a cyclical process of prewriting, drafting and revising. Even great authors create many drafts before their final one. Students should not think that their first draft gets checked only for spelling and grammar errors and then becomes the final copy. This belief has been fostered by the yellow copy, white copy versions traditionally handed in to teachers.

Luckily the word processor's chief advantage is in editing, so using the computer for this process becomes easier and more fun. The word processor enables words to be quickly deleted and moved. Editing does not involve erasures and the accompanying holes in paper special needs students often encounter. Inserting a more descriptive adjective or an additional sentence does not mean that the whole paper must be recopied. This ease of editing encourages students to continue revising and rewriting.

To help students in the editing process, encourage them to look at their own writings and the writings of others objectively. Some specific ideas are:

o Edit for idea development. Does each paragraph relate to one idea? Are irrelevant details deleted or saved for a different writing task? Are the ideas developed sequentially? Are the paragraphs in the best order for developing the idea?

o Give students several drafts of already written tasks (perhaps the teacher's or a famous author's) and review the changes and the effects of these revisions.

o Arrange for conference times with peers. Have students work in small groups to listen to each other's

writings. Questions asked in these groups help the writer know which parts are not explained well. Being part of a writing group helps develp listening as well as editing skills.

PUBLISHING PROCESS - COMMUNICATING

Too often students think they write for the teacher. However, writing is a way of sharing ideas and thoughts with a general audience. Students should begin to see writing as a form of communication. In order for the communication to be with someone other than the teacher the final copy should be available for others to read. If editing has been done in small groups students will already be involved in the written work and will be interested in seeing, for example, how conflicts got resolved or which suggestions were incorporated. The publishing process opens the written word to others, including but not exclusively, the teacher.

The following publishing ideas are being used successfully in schools across the country.:

o Publish a class newspaper. This gives the students a chance to tell their parents and friends exactly what they do when they go to school. For special needs classes, this can help other professionals, students and parents better understand what really happens "in that room down the hall" and perhaps begin or extend dialogue between regular and special educators.

o Student stories can have pictures added to make a book. These books can be bound, creating a class library or a new section of the school library. Some local libraries will even display these books in the children's or young adult sections.

o Create a class story with each child adding a few sentences. Done on the computer, students are unable to tell by the handwriting who has added which sentences.

o Distinguish between private and public writing by having students keep journals or diaries which are not for an audience.

o Have students write certain pieces with a different audience in mind. For example, creating an advertisement for a new cereal or health center aimed at young children, teens, parents, or physical health experts would show some real differences. Students could write several ads, each for a specific audience.

TOO MANY STUDENTS AND NOT ENOUGH COMPUTERS

While the process approach to writing can be done with pen and paper, the computer makes the process an easier one. For special needs students the process is easier and more concrete, with a neat and legible copy always in front of them.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE PROCESS APPROACH TO WRITING:

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